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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 002606

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SUBJECT: CHAIRMAN OF IRAQ'S ELECTION COMMISSION DISCUSSES
PREPARATIONS

REF: A. BAGHDAD 2243

[1](#)B. BAGHDAD 2568

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Gary A. Grappo for reasons
1.4(b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: The Head of Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC), Faraj al-Haydari, told POL M/C September 17 that IHEC is being subjected to a smear campaign orchestrated by the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) party and others. In his view the criticisms -- and calls to interrogate him in the Council of Representatives -- are tied to an effort to pressure PM Maliki into joining the ISCI-led Iraqi National Alliance (INA). Haydari described IHEC as a fragile but critically important institution and asked for USG support behind the scenes to curb the attacks. He expressed disappointment at the turnout levels for the month-long voter registration update set to end September 30. The IHEC chairman pushed back when POL M/C pressed for an open-list system (allowing voters to choose individual candidates and not just parties/coalitions), insisting that such a system was too advanced for today's Iraq. END SUMMARY.

IHEC Under Scrutiny

[1](#)2. (C) After nearly daily criticism of IHEC in the press over the past few weeks, Chairman Haydari told POL M/C September 17 that IHEC needed USG support in helping to fight a smear campaign waged by politically-motivated critics. He explained that IHEC's detractors were being led ISCI and other political parties who had not done well in the January elections. Chairman Haydari offered different reasons for the recent criticism. Some of those involved are political rivals of PM Maliki, intent on delaying passage of an elections law, as a way of pressuring the PM to reconsider his refusal to join the ISCI-led Iraqi National Alliance (INA), claimed Haydari. (COMMENT: In recent days, IHEC seems to be taking attacks from all sides: in the press, in the mosques, as well as from Parliamentarians. Sunni Arab Council of Representative (COR) members, for example, have been criticizing IHEC, using the issue of Kirkuk, to try to discredit voter registration lists compiled by IHEC, which in their view have too many new Kurdish voters. END COMMENT.) Haydari warned POL M/C that IHEC is delicate like crystal, and if were to be broken, it would be irreplaceable. A strong, credible IHEC is central to Iraq's ability to hold national elections in January 2010, he emphasized.

Voter Registration Turnout "Disappointing"

[1](#)3. (C) Haydari expressed disappointment in the turnout for this month's Voter Registration Update (VRU) (Ref A). He said fewer people than he expected were taking the opportunity to update their voter registration. He attributed the anemic turnout to a lack of enthusiasm: "People are not excited about the upcoming elections." When

asked what IHEC was doing to publicize the VRU, Haydari explained that IHEC has placed messages on TV, in the papers, on banners at schools. Most importantly, IHEC distributed 18 million Voter Information Cards in the month preceding the VRU. Haydari complained that political parties were not mobilizing participation. While IHEC had extended the deadline to Sept. 30, Haydari did not expect more than about three percent of Iraq's roughly 18 million voters to update their voter information. (NOTE: Iraq has a passive voter registration system, so most eligible Iraqi citizens are already registered to vote by virtue of being on the Public Distribution System for food rations. END NOTE.) QDistribution System for food rations. END NOTE.)

Still Waiting for an Election Law

14. (C) Haydari told POL M/C the election law continues to be held up because parties cannot come to agreement (Ref B). In his view, open lists are dangerous, given Iraq's current level of political immaturity; Haydari suggested that Iraq is "10-15 years away" from the level of political development and cohesiveness that would allow it to benefit from an open-list system. In his view, open lists only worked well in "sophisticated democracies" like the United States, where there are just a few dominant parties. Haydari argued the closed-list system is better for Iraq because it would lead to more unified party coalitions; in contrast, an open-list system would result in many individual candidates prevailing, weaker ruling coalitions, and little party discipline. He intimated that smaller parties are more susceptible to foreign influence.

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15. (C) Haydari said that the last time he had spoken with Grand Ayatollah Sistani, the Shia spiritual leader had said that he wanted open lists in multiple districts in the belief that an open-list election would bring in fresh people and get rid of politicians who are not doing anything. Haydari said he disagreed with Sistani, arguing that the 2009 provincial elections, which had been run on an open-list system, had resulted in the same old faces, no real change. Haydari also took issue with the argument that open lists inject more excitement and enthusiasm into the electoral campaign, amping voter turnout: "Iraqis don't care about open list or closed list; they care about bread in their mouths, electricity at their houses," said Haydari. (COMMENT: Haydari is a KDP Kurd, and the Kurds have been long-time opponents of an open-list ballot, as the paucity of Kurdish parties in a closed-list system provides greatest advantage to the two most powerful parties. END COMMENT.)

On IHEC's Immediate Needs

16. (C) Asked what IHEC's immediate needs were, Haydari said IHEC needs three things: the passage of an election law, the funding promised from the Ministry of Finance (some USD 110 million, to pay for organizing the elections), and support against the negative press. He said IHEC does not need any other assistance, but noted that his organization relies on the current technical assistance programs provided by UNAMI, the European Union, and the United States.

17. (C) COMMENT: Haydari comes across as a savvy, plugged in political player. Despite his Kurdish and KDP background, he reportedly has good connections to PM Maliki. We find credible his description of the machinations behind the attacks on IHEC and the stalling in the COR over the elections. Other contacts also report that a vocal minority from a range of Shia and Sunni parties -- primarily from ISCI -- are using the interrogation as a means to delay passage of an election law. His skepticism about open lists seems a bit

overstated. It possibly reflects the substantial influence of UNAMI and IFES, who are clearly focused on getting in place the simplest feasible elections system, given their concerns that may IHEC may not be given enough time to organize credible elections under the more complicated rules of an open list/multiple district system. We believe if the COR acts by mid-October to pass an elections law, we can have elections on time and still support the more transparent, voter-friendly option of open lists.

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